

## The Quadrille of Love

Today is Trinity Sunday in the calendar of the Church. All around the world, preachers who follow the lectionary are programming songs like “Holy, Holy, Holy” and wondering how they can avoid this peculiar bit of Church doctrine in their sermons.  $1+1+1=3$  but it also equals 1. What sort of nonsense is that? If you had any doubts yet that you had called a lunatic to be your pastor, I actually got excited when I realized I was going to have the opportunity to wrestle with this theological conundrum. But I promise not to be so esoteric as to put you to sleep. I suspect, though, that this particular congregation is theologically adept enough to be able to go toe to toe with Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas on this subject. From my researches on this subject in the past couple of weeks, I’m particularly indebted to the work of two living theologians: Jürgen Moltmann, Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology at the University of Tübingen in Germany, and Dr. Barbara Brown Zikmund, formerly Dean at Pacific School of Religion and President of Hartford Seminary, currently a guest lecturer at Catholic University of America, who also credits Moltmann in her work.

Most conversations about the Trinity start and end with some common analogies, whether we are struggling to explain the idea to children, non-believers, new believers or those who’ve spent a lifetime in the Church. Imagine, if you will, the following dialogue: “God is the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, three persons but only one God. God is sort of like an egg.” “An egg?” “Yes, an egg. There’s a shell, the white, the yolk, but it’s still one egg.” “Hmmm.” Or, if you’re Irish, “God is like the leaf of the blessed shamrock. Three lobes but only one leaf.” “Uhh huh.” For those anxious to tie their analogies to the Scripture, we have these arguments: “Well, Jesus said he was the Living Water, and you know, water is the only substance on Earth that we see naturally in its three forms – a solid when it’s ice, liquid water, and as a gas in mist or steam.” “O-Kay, so you’re saying that God the Father is frozen, icy, cool...” “Well, no not exactly...” Or there’s this one: “Jesus said he was the Light of the World and you know all natural light is really composed of three wavelengths – red, yellow and blue. We see the colors as separate but together they make up one light.” Actually, of all of these, that one appeals to me most, probably because one of the many skills I picked up in my years in the theatre was that of stage lighting and, indeed, if you want natural looking light on stage you have to carefully balance blue, yellow and red wavelengths. But, it’s not really as simple as all that.

Ultimately, I find none of these explanations of the Triune nature of God to be satisfying and I think I know why. All of these analogies, like so much of Trinitarian thinking over the centuries, are attempts to describe the essence of God, who God is in Godself. As I’ve mentioned in this pulpit before, I think this is a futile task. I don’t believe that the creature can ever fully understand the Creator. We are too different. I think I have good company in this belief, not only from post-modern philosophers and theologians but from the Biblical prophets. In chapter 46 of Isaiah, the word of God comes to that prophet, saying, “<sup>5</sup>To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, as though we were alike? <sup>9</sup> ... for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me.” The Lutheran pastor and scholar, Mary W. Anderson points to the apparently inscrutable doctrine of the Trinity as proof that we cannot ultimately know the nature of God. She writes, “How important is it to explain the mystery of God revealed to us in

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three distinct ways? Mysteries explained cease to be mysteries, don't they? Perhaps the doctrine of the Trinity challenges our secret wish to know God fully and eliminate all mystery.”

I do believe that it is important to grapple with the idea of the Trinity, that it should be something for us above and beyond the admission of our own lack of understanding. If nothing else, Mary Anderson writes, it gives us a common language with which to talk about God in the midst of a world that is often hostile to our message and mission. There is also something about this peculiar approach to God that reveals something deeply important about the Good News that Jesus brought. Ruth Duck, who wrote the words to “Womb of Life, and Source of Being,” which we just sang, writes “The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that Christians have come to know God through the Holy One made known to Israel; through the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and through the Spirit who creates and renews the church and the world. Without affirming what the Trinity has affirmed, Christianity loses its identity and its history.” Barbara Brown Zikmund, who has wrestled throughout her illustrious career with the doctrine of the Trinity and its relationship to feminist theology, affirms her belief that Jesus taught the Good News of love through Father, Son and Holy Spirit and says, “To be a Christian is to assert that Jesus Christ has reshaped human knowledge about God.” In other words, to fail to engage with the concept of Trinity is to ignore the revelation at the center of Jesus’ message.

So, what we can do, I think, is to talk about our experience of God, in our lives and in the world around us, and it is here, in experiential, existential categories rather than in essential ones that the Trinity really begins to make sense for me. In fact, it was in existential language that the doctrine of the Trinity first began to be discussed, although I don’t think the Greek Fathers of the Church would have called themselves existentialists. That whole notion of God-in-Three-Persons draws its language from the theatre, that incarnational art of which I am so fond. When those early Christian theologians talked about the three persons of God, they were using the same Greek word used to describe the characters that actors portrayed. In the Greek theatre, one actor might play several parts in one play, differentiated by the masks the actor wore. An actor might appear on-stage masked as Oedipus, then walk off, don a new mask and reappear as the antagonist of Oedipus, Creon, or even as Oedipus’ mother-wife, Jocasta. Same actor, different personas, different parts in the play, different actions to perform, different relationships with the other characters. Indeed, the influence of this early strand of Trinitarian thought can be seen in the medieval theology and Renaissance dramaturgy that understood the world as the theatre of God, a very congenial metaphor for me and one used to profound effect by the late Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar. We experience God in three characters, three persons: Our Creator, our Savior, our Comforter. It is as if God appears to us wearing three different costumes for three different relationships.

When we start to think of the Trinity as an attempt to understand God through God’s relationships, other even more familiar analogies come to mind. All of us, after all, play different roles in life in our different relationships. To most of you all here today, I am pastor, but to Connie I am also husband and to Kit, Colleen and Sean, I am father.

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Charlie Scalise first knew me as student and I am gratified beyond words that he still manages to listen patiently to my sermons and, more amazingly, to derive some amount of pastoral guidance from them. Our relationships with others define our roles in life, both static and shifting. They are the existential truths of our identities. When Jesus speaks of God as Father and himself as Son and promises the coming of the Comforter, he is describing the existential core truth about the identity of God: God is in loving relationship. As Jürgen Moltmann writes, “When we hear the names, Father and Son and Holy Spirit, we sense that in the mystery of God there must be a wondrous community.” Moltmann also affirms, “It is only from the perspective of the Trinitarian God that we can claim that “God is Love,” because love is never alone.”

The great patristic theologian St. Augustine had this to say on the subject of the trinity: “Now, love is of someone who loves, and something is loved with love. So then there are three: the lover, the beloved, and the love.” Those who have been deeply in love know this to be true. Lover and loved become one, as Genesis says, “they become one flesh.” But they also discover deep truths about themselves in relationship. And those who have spent time in the company of people who are in love know how their deep care for each other impacts those in contact with them. Family and friends feel the palpable presence of the love and it affects them as well. The deep internal relationship of God has echoes throughout creation.

For Barbara Brown Zikmund, it is this revelation of God as intrinsically in relationship that allows the Trinitarian concept to burst the bonds of patriarchy and gender-specific language and, in her words, to “(express) certain understandings of God consistent with women's experience.” She cites the work of Carol Gilligan, a book entitled “In a Different Voice,” which she characterizes as “contend(ing) that, unlike men, women find their identity in relationship,” that men are more interested in power than women and that women are more interested in intimacy. I’ve not read Gilligan’s work for myself and if, indeed, that is what she contends, I would call it a gross over-simplification of gender issues. But it does get to the heart of the Gospel of the Trinity, relationship and intimacy with God who sets aside power to become the servant of humankind, and that is Good News indeed. It is this focus on the Trinity as revelatory of relationship and intimacy that moves Ruth Duck to champion the use of new language as well as old to talk about God. She writes, “shaped by and grateful for the witness of scripture (of God as Father, Son and Spirit) but free to speak our own words of praise, we can use varied metaphors to speak of God. Because the Trinity is a living reality that embraces us, and no mere abstract doctrine, we are not bound by the liturgical formulations of the past. We are free and responsible to offer God praise with the best language we know.” Although this is a truth I claim, I confess my own inability to give it consistent expression. I am grateful that the Good Shepherd community is farther down this path than I and for your patience with me as I work to make my language match my belief.

This existential, experiential way of approaching the idea of the Trinity as giving insight to God as being in relationship and community allows us to move from scholastic speculation to the real-life working out of our faith. In writing of the loving exchange of energy between the three persons of the Trinity, the eighth-century theologian John of

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Damascus uses the Greek word “perichoresis,” literally “dancing around.” John uses the term to signify his concept of the internal relationship of God, that all three persons of the Trinity mutually share in the life of the others, so that none is isolated or detached from the actions of the others. But let’s take the metaphor on its own terms for a moment, as many writers have done. Ultimately, this dance of God is not, as at least one writer has suggested, a pas de deux between Father and Son with the Spirit providing the music. Nor is it a trio. In the greater plan of God, the perichoresis is a quadrille, a dance of four partners – our Source, our Brother, our Comforter and fourth, the Bride of Christ, the Church, ourselves.

It is our being drawn into this loving dance to which Paul refers in our scripture today. In our relationship with Christ Jesus, Paul says, we are set free from the spirit of fear and enveloped by the Holy Spirit, which adopts us into the divine Family relationship. We are sons and daughters of God and joint heirs with Christ. As Cyril of Alexandria wrote in the Fifth century, “We become by grace what God is by nature.” Now, we too are in relationship, part of the dance, dancing with our Mother, our Father, our Creator, just as our Brother Jesus does. I hope that image is as intimate and potent for you as it is for me. When Kit was still very small and I was in seminary, my class schedule and Connie’s work schedule meant that I was his primary care giver. We had some quiet time together in the morning before my classes and after class I would pick him up from day care to be with me while I did homework and cooked supper. One of our favorite fun things to do together, once the homework was done and before supper, was for me to put on loud, happy rock & roll (usually Bruce Springsteen) and to dance him all around the living room of our little Seminary Village apartment. I would spin him around in the air and he would laugh and laugh. When I think of life in relationship to our loving Three-Personed God, I think of being caught up in that joyful dance, that perichoresis, and being spun around like a little child and laughing and laughing.

Paul writes that in order to share in the glory of Christ, the joy of the dance, we must also be willing to share in his suffering, the hard work of living in the world and proclaiming the Good News of God even in the face of opposition. Jürgen Moltmann writes, “The Trinitarian unity of the Son and the Father through the Spirit is a model for the relationships of men and women in the Spirit of Christ.” As Barbara Brown Zikmund puts it, “God as community calls us to shared responsibility.” To take the doctrine of the Trinity seriously means to adopt “a radical ethic of justice and care... a vision that the self and the other should be treated as of equal worth.” If we are partners in the perichoresis, the divine dance of relationship with God, then so are our neighbors, our sisters and brothers. We are called to work for fairness and inclusion. No one is to be marginalized for reasons of gender, race, ability, economics. No one is to be despised as the other, the alien. Just as our Brother Jesus, we are to seek the good of others, willing to be servants to those God spins into the circle of our dance. We are our brothers’ and our sisters’ keeper, held up, as Zikmund writes, to “standards of nurturance, responsibility and care.”

And so, ultimately, we may find in that peculiar and mysterious doctrine of the Trinity the story of a loving, dancing relationship, into which we are invited. The dance may

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sometimes take us to places that we would not have thought to go, involve us in active love with people that we would never have thought to love. But as we are whirled around by our Triune God in the great dance of love and life, we will find that there is indeed Good News, that even the difficulties may become joys and that we may claim the rich treasures of our inheritance of love from our gracious, faithful adoptive Father and that “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, One God and Mother of us all, Amen.